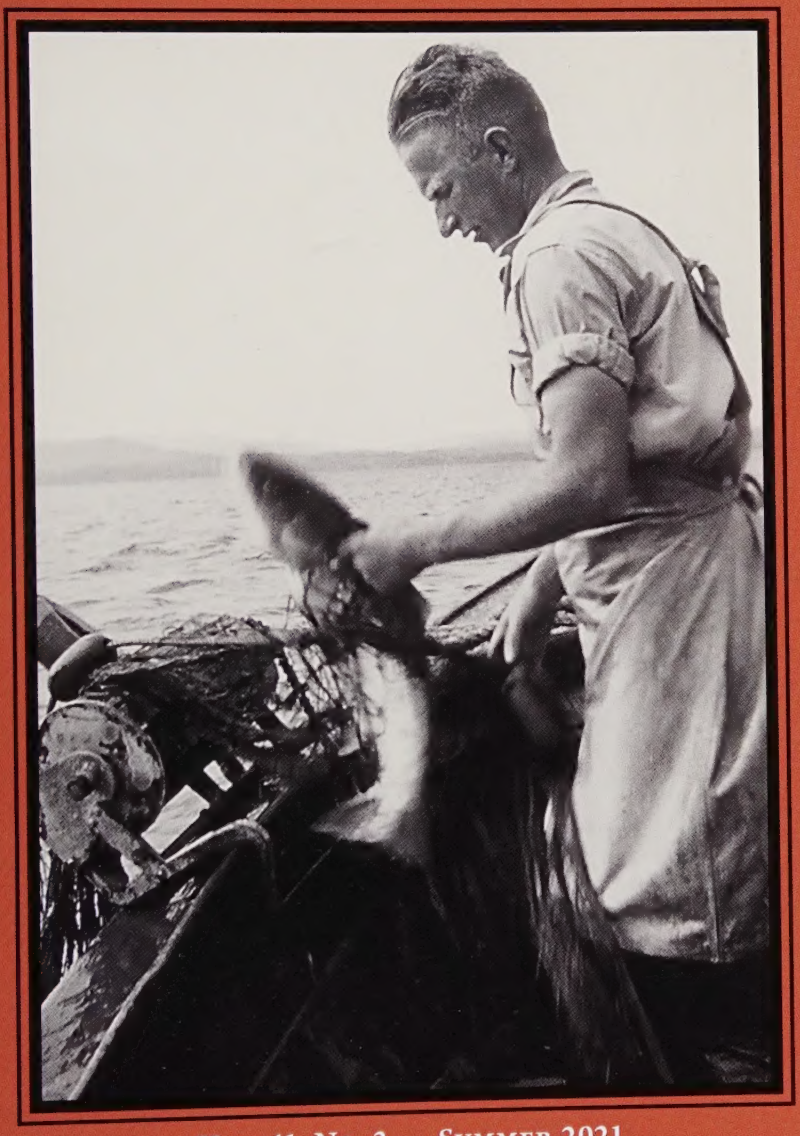
Clatsop County Historical Society Quarterly

CUMTUX



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In This Issue . . .

CCHS Image #15665.330

Shift over. Time to go home.

Traffic stopped each day as crowds of Bumble Bee cannery workers in their white outfits and headscarves hurried across Marine Drive to the Superette grocery store to load up on lunch items. When the workday was over, traffic was stopped again as they crossed the road to head on home. Did we all assume that tuna and salmon would continue forever to furnish a living wage for thousands of hard workers? No longer do we rely on the bounty of the river and the ocean to the extent we once did. Memories of those days are receding further into the past. The writers in this issue of Cumtux recall what the fishing industry meant to their lives.

Rea Raihala Christoffersson recalls the times each year when her family lived in a "scow village" on the Columbia River and the people whose lives intersected with theirs, an idyllic time a few lucky others shared.

The second installment of John E. Seeborg's three-part story in this issue tells how he as a young boy contributed to the welfare of his family during the Depression and the way in which the Union Fishermen's Co-operative Packing Company and the other canneries helped too.

Paavo Fellman, the younger son of Werner and Helena Kastel Fellman, wrote about growing up in Astoria. Werner Fellman's business motto, "We do not misrepresent," might have been a motto for his honesty through times of great troubles. For no fault of his own, he lost all he had and moved away and began again to build a successful business. For his work as an honorary Finnish consul for the west coast, he was knighted into the Order of the White Rose, 1st class of Finland. His biography appears in Gaston's Centennial History of Oregon (Vol. 2) and Fred Lockley's History of the Columbia River Valley from the Dalles to the Sea, the most celebrated Finn to live in Clatsop County.

This issue ends with Laura Torres' story of a new cannery worker's time on the line.

—The Editor

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CUMTUX

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Contents

1 Life in a Scow Village:
By Rea Raihala Christoffersson with anecdotes and photos from Ray Raihala, Rod Raihala, Karen Raihala Burke, and Steve Burke

10 A Finn From Astoria
by John E. Seeborg

22 Werner and Helena Fellman
A handwritten recollection by their son, Paavo Fellman, Transcribed by Jane Harmer.

45 Two weeks at Bumble Bee
By Laura Penner Torres

Front Cover:
Willie Raihala picking up his net using a power-assist roller.
Image courtesy of Rea Raihala

CUMTUX: Chinook jargon:
"To know…to inform"

Life in a Scow Village:
Gillnetting "Out on the River" in the 1950s.

By Rea Raihala Christoffersson
with anecdotes and photos from Ray Raihala, Rod Raihala, Karen Raihala Burke, and Steve Burke

In the 1950s our family had a summer ritual. We towed our float house from a sheltered slough to the middle of the Columbia to spend part of the summer "out on the river."

My dad was a gillnet fisherman, and our home was part of a "scow village" that included six floating buildings. Our "neighborhood" had three float houses belonging to my uncle, Willie Raihala and his family; Ed Eriksen; and my dad, Reno Raihala, and our family. We were all from Brownsmead. The village also had three fish scows that received and iced fish to be picked up later by cannery launches.

Float House Life

Our float houses were not fancy. They were built on large, four-tiered platforms consisting of floating logs, beams, stringers (joists), all topped with wide, unpainted planks that formed the deck.

There was a central "great room" that served as kitchen, dining, and living room. There was one bedroom to each side, with a bathroom off one of the bedrooms. A storage room was reached from a covered porch in front of the entrance. We had a wire-fenced "yard" to keep us kids safely corralled when we were little. Beyond the yard was a net rack for drying and repairing nets.

The houses were moored to pilings, or dolphins (clusters of pilings), near a group of small islands north of Knappa. A row of connected logs, called boomsticks, linked the buildings.

As children, we would often stand in our fenced yard and yell across to our cousins, "We wanna come over and play!" Eventually, the racket would wear one of our mothers down, and she would make the precarious trip along the logs to deliver a kid to the other house for a play date.

The walk along slippery logs was precarious. Karen Raihala Burke, Willie's daughter, recalls that her mother Lila once fell into the river while carrying her over to our place. Aili, my mom, rushed to the rescue. (After that episode, our fathers constructed safer, plank walkways among the houses and fish scows.)

Photo by Lila Raihala

Float house and fish scow, with gillnet boats. North Island, May 1938.

Most of our days lacked such excitement. However, life on the water was usually very peaceful. Karen remembers, "The float house would gently move when boats went past." This motion, plus the river's quiet sloshing, rocked us to sleep at night.

Lights, Water, Sewage

In earlier years, our house had a WinCharger windmill on the roof connected to an electricity generator and a large bank of storage batteries. There had been a propane (Flame-O) tank to operate a gas stove and refrigerator. In addition, there had also been a washing machine with a gas-operated engine.

Such off-grid systems were popular in rural America in the 1930s and 40s, but by the 1950s, they were old and hard to maintain, so we dismantled them. Consequently, life on our float house became even more primitive.

We had no electricity. Cooking and heating water was done on a classic, old-fashioned range that had been converted from burning wood to oil. The stovetop worked fine, but the oven was very erratic. This range also heated the house. Also, we had an auxiliary one-burner camp stove that used pressurized white gas (naphtha).

We used an old-fashioned icebox to chill milk and other perishables; we replenished this from the ice deliveries brought by cannery launches. We brought our drinking water in a large keg from our land house and augmented it with rainwater. Our drinking water was stored in a large ceramic crock with a dipper. We also pumped river water into a tank on the roof. This water was used for cleaning but was

Two weeks at Bumble Bee

By Laura Penner Torres

In 1979 I had just graduated from Astoria High School, gotten married, and was looking for work. The biggest employer at the time was the Bumble Bee Cannery, so I went in and applied. This was the perfect location because I lived in an apartment just up the hill on Alameda, and I could walk to work. They signed me up, issued me a white apron, hair net, and a knife with a white plastic handle. It was really sharp. I was inducted with several other people in matching white aprons, hairnets, and knives.

During the orientation, they warned us to be careful of being stuck with a fishbone, as it would be the end of us. Apparently, a stick from a fishbone caused a nasty infection. I began to have doubts right then that this was the place for me.

They led us out to a long gleaming stainless steel table with a conveyor belt and showed us how to remove the skin from the cooked tuna with the knife. There was a "cat food" hole where the skin, bones, and guts went and a belt where the "good" fish went. I had been working for a while when I noticed on the far side of the plant a line of small older ladies, speaking Finnish, were lined up and working faster than anyone else in the place. I was amazed at how fast they could clean a fish. When I asked the girl next to me who they were, she said they were the old-timers who were getting paid by the piece. So the faster they cleaned, the more money they made. I was sure I could never go as fast as they were going. They could clean about eight fish to my one. Clearly, I was not very good at this.

So I'm working away, going as fast as I can, and this really loud buzzer goes off, scaring the hell out of me. I thought it was some kind of air-raid siren and that we were being attacked, but no, it was just break time. Everyone in the place dropped what they were doing and rushed for the break room. We had 10 minutes to get coffee, have a snack, sit down and then be back at our station when the second buzzer went off at the end of the break. Ok, so that was the second sign letting me know that maybe this isn't the right place for me. It sure had its moments of panic and excitement.

The fish smell inside the plant wasn't that bad; in fact, it was ok. It smelled of cooked fish and not the slippery, fishy smell you might expect. I discovered it wasn't so bad because huge fans were pumping the smell out, which is why the whole area of Uniontown smelled

CCHS Image #12421.330

The cutting line at the Bumble Bee Cannery.

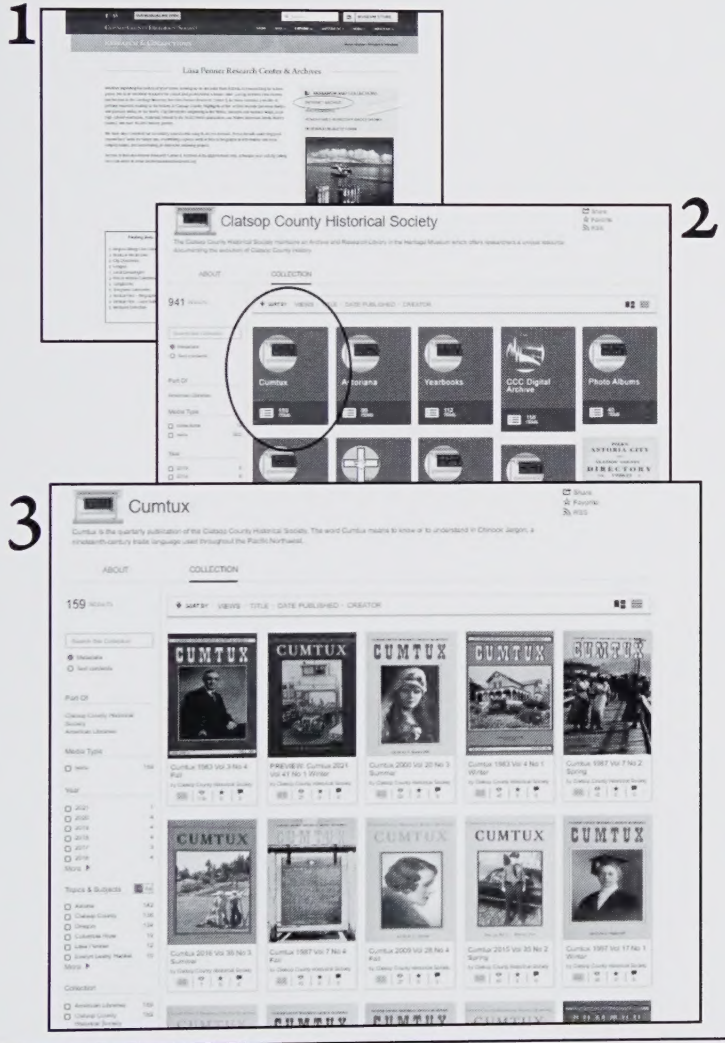
of fish when they brought in a load and began cooking it. I remember going home at night, and everyone around me would look at me and plug their noses. I smelled horrible!! The fish smell was wafting everywhere around me, like Pigpen in the Peanuts cartoon. I didn't think I would ever get the smell out. My house smelled, all my clothes smelled, my hair smelled, it seemed to soak into everything. Clue three that it wasn't for me.

I had been working for a week when the supervisor came up to me and asked if I wanted to try a different station. I was game. They took me to the head of the table that I was working on and told me I would be removing the head and tail from the fish for the cleaners down the line. There were three other people already doing this. I suspected they noticed that I was so slow at skinning the fish they needed to have me do something else. It was easy work. They would dump a bunch of fish on the table. I twisted the head and tail off, putting them in the cat food hole, and slid the bodies onto the conveyor. After a while, it got really boring, and the other guys on the table started a game. The fish was cooked whole before it was processed, so it was slightly warm. As we pulled off the head and tail, the cooked white eyeballs would pop out of the heads and roll around the table. We began flicking them back and forth like a gross game of marbles. It enlivened the day a bit.

We would sometimes get a load of fish on the table that had no smell. That was strange, so I asked what was up. I was told that sometimes the fish was old when it came into the plant, so they would treat it with formaldehyde to eliminate the bad smells. I have no idea if that was true or not; that is just what I was told.

After a couple of weeks of working, I was finally going to receive my first paycheck. I was so excited because I knew I had rent to pay and needed to get some groceries. I was handed my check, and it was for $25. They had taken $25 for union dues. WHAT?? I didn't know that this was something I had to pay for. They may have explained it in the orientation, but I didn't realize that it would be so much. Remember this was in 1979 when the minimum wage was $2.30 an hour. That was the final straw; I quit—I kept the knife.

Past issues of the *Cumtux* are now available for viewing and research purposes. A link to the *Internet Archive*, where they are stored, can be found on the Research & Collections page of the CCHS web site at ***https://astoriamuseums.org/explore/research-collections***. Once there, select the Internet Archive button in the box on the right, then, on the *Internet Archive* page, select the *Cumtux* collection. From there you browse or search the entire collection currently available on the site.



Courtesy of Brian Nice

"The Alley"
A water color by Georgia Heckbert, 1928. Showing Flavel Street in Astoria.